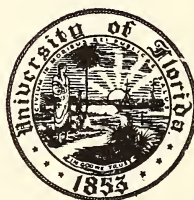


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**Abstract**



# HOLES IN THE SKY

*Books*  
*By Louis MacNeice*

\*

POEMS

THE EARTH COMPELS

PLANT AND PHANTOM

AUTUMN JOURNAL

SPRINGBOARD

OUT OF THE PICTURE

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

THE DARK TOWER

AGAMEMNON OF AÆSCHYLUS  
(*translation*)

LETTERS FROM ICELAND  
(*with W. H. Auden*)

\*

LOUIS MACNEICE

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HOLES  
IN THE  
SKY

Poems 1944-1947



RANDOM HOUSE · NEW YORK



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Q.B.



What is truth? says Pilate,  
Waits for no answer;  
Double your stakes, says the clock  
To the ageing dancer;  
Double the guard, says Authority,  
Treble the bars;  
Holes in the sky, says the child  
Scanning the stars.



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# HOLES IN THE SKY

## NOTE

'The Streets of Laredo' (pronounced Lareædo) is the name of an American cowboy song. The original tune was specially arranged by William Alwyn so that the poem printed here could be sung by my wife Hedli Anderson.

## THE STREETS OF LAREDO

O early one morning I walked out like Agag,  
Early one morning to walk through the fire  
Dodging the pythons that leaked on the pavements  
With tinkle of glasses and tangle of wire;

When grimed to the eyebrows I met an old fireman  
Who looked at me wryly and thus did he say:  
'The streets of Laredo are closed to all traffic,  
We won't never master this joker to-day.

'O hold the branch tightly and wield the axe brightly,  
The bank is in powder, the banker's in hell,  
But loot is still free on the streets of Laredo  
And when we drive home we drive home on the bell.'

Then out from a doorway there sidled a cockney,  
A rocking-chair rocking on top of his head:  
'O fifty-five years I been feathering my love-nest  
And look at it now—why, you'd sooner be dead.'

At which there arose from a wound in the asphalt,  
His big wig a-smoulder, Sir Christopher Wren  
Saying: 'Let them make hay of the streets of Laredo;  
When your ground-rents expire I will build them again.'

Then twangling their bibles with wrath in their nostrils  
From Bunhill Fields came Bunyan and Blake:  
'Laredo the golden is fallen, is fallen;  
Your flame shall not quench nor your thirst shall not slake.'

'I come to Laredo to find me asylum,'  
Says Tom Dick and Harry the Wandering Jew;  
'They tell me report at the first police station  
But the station is pancaked—so what can I do?'



Thus eavesdropping sadly I strolled through Laredo  
Perplexed by the dicta misfortunes inspire  
Till one low last whisper inveigled my earhole—  
The voice of the Angel, the voice of the fire:

*O late, very late, have I come to Laredo  
A whimsical bride in my new scarlet dress  
But at last I took pity on those who were waiting  
To see my regalia and feel my caress.*

*Now ring the bells gaily and play the hose daily,  
Put splints on your legs, put a gag on your breath;  
O you streets of Laredo, you streets of Laredo,  
Lay down the red carpet—My dowry is death.*

## HIATUS

The years that did not count—Civilians in the towns  
Remained at the same age as in Nineteen-Thirty-Nine,  
Saying last year, meaning the last of peace;  
Yet eyes began to pucker, mouth to crease,  
The hiatus was too packed with fears and frowns,  
The would-be absent heart came forth a magnetic mine.

As if the weekly food queue were to stretch,  
Absorb all future Europe. Or as if  
The sleepers in the Tube had come from Goya's Spain  
Or Thucydides' Corcyra—a long way to fetch  
People to prove that civilization is vain,  
Wrapped in old quilts; no wonder they wake stiff.

Yes, we wake stiff and older; especially when  
The schoolboys of the Thirties reappear,  
Fledged in the void, indubitably men,  
Having kept vigil on the Unholy Mount  
And found some dark and tentative things made clear,  
Some clear made dark, in the years that did not count.

## CORNER SEAT

Suspended in a moving night  
The image in the next-door train  
Looks at first sight as self-assured  
As you do, traveller. Look again:

Windows between you and the world  
Keep out the cold, keep out the fright;  
Then why does your reflection seem  
So lonely in the moving night?

## AFTERMATH

Shuffle and cut. What was so large and one  
Is now a pack of dog's-eared chances—Oh  
Where is the Fear that warmed us to the gun,  
That moved the cock to tousle the night and crow  
In the gaps between the bombs? In this new round  
The joker that could have been any moment death  
Has been withdrawn, the cards are what they say  
And none is wild; the bandaging dark which bound  
This town together is loosed and in the array  
Of bourgeois lights man's love can save its breath:  
Their ransomed future severs once more the child  
Of luck from the child of lack—and none is wild.

## TWELFTH NIGHT

Snow-happy hicks of a boy's world—  
O crunch of bull's-eyes in the mouth,  
O crunch of frost beneath the foot—  
If time would only remain furled  
In white, and thaw were not for certain  
And snow would but stay put, stay put!

When the pillar-box wore a white bonnet--  
O harmony of roof and hedge,  
O parity of sight and thought--  
And each flake had your number on it  
And lives were round for not a number  
But equalled nought, but equalled nought!

But now the sphinx must change her shape—  
O track that reappears through slush,  
O broken riddle, burst grenade—  
And lives must be pulled out like tape  
To measure something not themselves,  
Things not given but made, but made.

For now the time of gifts is gone—  
O boys that grow, O snows that melt,  
O bathos that the years must fill—  
Here is dull earth to build upon  
Undecorated; we have reached  
Twelfth Night or what you will . . . you will.

## BLUEBELLS

She, who last felt young during the war,  
This Easter has no peace to be waiting for;  
Though coining dandelions from her eyes  
Has lost the old enrichment of surprise  
And though her man is back, yet feels he has brought  
The Desert with him, making her cheeks taut.

So both wake early, listen without words  
To the now foreign badinage of birds,  
And in the twilight when only the bats fly  
They miss those engines overbrimming the sky,  
For all green Nature has gone out of gear  
Since they were apart and hoping, since last year.

Sun is too bright and brittle, wheat is too quick,  
She turns from them to the wood where the slow thick  
Shade is becalmed and chill and as a glacial stream  
Meeting the sea inlays and weaves a milky gleam  
Through the dark waste, so here the bluebells flow  
Athwart the undergrowth, a merger of blue snow.

'Oh in this dark beneathness where he and I  
Live, let a delta of flowers atone for the sky  
Which we cannot face and from my ice-cap, oh,  
Let one river at least unfreeze and flow  
And through that brine so deep and yet so dim  
Let my cold gentleness irradiate him.'

## TAM CARI CAPITIS

That the world will never be quite—what a cliché—the same  
again

Is what we only learn by the event

When a friend dies out on us and is not there

To share the periphery of a remembered scent

Or leave his thumb-print on a shared ideal;

Yet it is not at floodlit moments we miss him most,

Not intervolution of wind-rinsed plumage of oat-field

Nor curragh dancing off a primeval coast

Nor the full strings of passion; it is in killing

Time where he could have livened it, such as the drop-by-drop

Of games like darts or chess, turning the faucet

On full at a threat to the queen or double top.



## THE NATIONAL GALLERY

The kings who slept in the caves are awake and out,  
The pictures are back in the Gallery; Old Masters twirl their  
cadenzas, whisper and shout,  
Hundreds of windows are open again on a vital but changeless  
world—a day-dream free from doubt.

Here are the angels playing their lutes at the Birth—  
Clay become porcelain; the pattern, the light, the ecstasy which  
make sense of the earth;  
Here is Gethsemane scooped like a glacier, here is Calvary  
calmly assured of its own worth.

Here are the gold haloes, opaque as coins,  
The pink temple of icing-sugar, the blandly scalloped rock which  
joins  
Primitive heaven and earth; here is our Past wiping the smuts  
from his eyes, girding his loins.

Here saint may be gorgeous, hedonist austere,  
The soul's nativity drawn of the earth and earthy, our brother  
the Ass being near,  
The petty compartments of life thrown wind-wide open, our  
lopsided instincts and customs atoned for here.

Here only too have the senses unending joy:  
Draperies slip but slip no further and expectation cannot cloy;  
The great Venetian buttocks, the great Dutch bosoms, remain  
in their time—their prime—beyond alloy.

And the Painter's little daughter, far-off-eyed,  
Still stretches for the cabbage white, her sister dawdling at her  
side;  
That she grew up to be mad does not concern us, the idyl and  
the innocent poise abide.

Aye; the kings are back from their caves in the Welsh hills,  
Refreshed by darkness, armed with colour, sleight-of-hand and  
imponderables,

Armed with Uccello's lances, with beer-mugs, dragons' tongues,  
peacocks' eyes, bangles and spangles and flounces and frills;

Armed with the full mystique of the commonplace,  
The lusts of the eye, the gullet, the loins, the memory—grace  
after living and grace

Before some plain-clothes death grabs at the artist's jemmy,  
leaves us yet one more half-solved case.

For the quickness of the heart deceives the eye,  
Reshuffling the themes: a Still Life lives while portrayed flesh  
and feature die

Into fugues and subterfuges of being as enveloping and as aloof  
as a frosty midnight sky.

So fling wide the windows, this window and that, let the air  
Blowing from times unconfined to Then, from places further  
and fuller than There,

Purge our particular time-bound unliving lives, rekindle a pente-  
cost in Trafalgar Square.

## LITTORAL

Indigo, mottle of purple and amber, ink,  
Danson whipped with cream, improbable colours of sea  
And unanalysable rhythms—fingering foam  
Tracing, erasing its runes, regardless  
Of you and me  
And whether we think it escape or the straight way home.

The sand here looks like metal, it feels there like fur,  
The wind films the sand with sand;  
This hoary beach is burgeoning with minutiae  
Like a philosopher  
Who, thinking, makes cat's-cradles with string—or a widow  
Who knits for her sons but remembers a tomb in another land.

Brain-bound or heart-bound sea—old woman or old man—  
To whom we are ciphers, creatures to ignore,  
We poach from you what images we can,  
Luxuriously afraid  
To plump the Unknown in a bucket with a spade—  
Each child his own seashore.

## THE CROMLECH

From trivia of froth and pollen  
White tufts in the rabbit warren  
And every minute like a ticket  
Nicked and dropped, nicked and dropped,  
Extracters and abstracters ask  
What emerges, what survives,  
And once the stopper is unstopped  
What was the essence in the flask  
And what is Life apart from lives  
And where, apart from fact, the value.

To which we answer, being naïve,  
Wearing the world upon our sleeve,  
That to dissect a given thing  
Unravelling its complexity  
Outrages its simplicity  
For essence is not merely core  
And each event implies the world,  
A centre needs periphery.

This being so, at times at least  
Granted the sympathetic pulse  
And granted the perceiving eye  
Each pregnant with a history,  
Appearance and appearances—  
In spite of the philosophers  
With their jejune dichotomies—  
Can be at times reality.

So Tom and Tessy holding hands  
(Dare an abstraction steal a kiss?)  
Cannot be generalized away,  
Reduced by bleak analysis  
To pointers demonstrating laws  
Which drain the colour from the day;

Not mere effects of a crude cause  
But of themselves significant,  
To rule-of-brain recalcitrant,  
This that they are and do is This . . .

Tom is here, Tessy is here  
At this point in a given year  
With all this hour's accessories,  
A given glory—and to look  
That gift-horse in the mouth will prove  
Or disprove nothing of their love  
Which is as sure intact a fact,  
Though young and supple, as what stands  
Obtuse and old, in time congealed,  
Behind them as they mingle hands—  
Self-contained, unexplained,  
The cromlech in the clover field.

## CARRICK REVISITED

Back to Carrick, the castle as plumb assured  
As thirty years ago—Which war was which?  
Here are new villas, here is a sizzling grid  
But the green banks are as rich and the lough as hazily lazy  
And the child's astonishment not yet cured.

Who was—and am—dumbfounded to find myself  
In a topographical frame—here, not there—  
The channels of my dreams determined largely  
By random chemistry of soil and air;  
Memories I had shelved peer at me from the shelf.

Fog-horn, mill-horn, corncrake and church bell  
Half-heard through boarded time as a child in bed  
Glimpses a brangle of talk from the floor below  
But cannot catch the words. Our past we know  
But not its meaning—whether it meant well.

Time and place—our bridgeheads into reality  
But also its concealment! Out of the sea  
We land on the Particular and lose  
All other possible bird's-eye views, the Truth  
That is of Itself for Itself—but not for me.

Torn before birth from where my fathers dwelt,  
Schooled from the age of ten to a foreign voice,  
Yet neither western Ireland nor southern England  
Cancels this interlude; what chance misspelt  
May never now be righted by my choice.

Whatever then my inherited or acquired  
Affinities, such remains my childhood's frame  
Like a belated rock in the red Antrim clay  
That cannot at this era change its pitch or name—  
And the pre-natal mountain is far away.

## SLUM SONG

O the slums of Dublin fermenting with children

*Wander far and near*

The growing years are a cruel squadron

And poverty is a rusty cauldron

*Wander near and far.*

The youths play cards by the broken fanlight

*Wander far and near*

The Jack looks greasy in the sunlight

As hands will fumble in the moonlight

*Wander near and far.*

And the grown man must play the horses

*Wander far and near*

Some do better on different courses

But the blacks will remain to draw the hearses

*Wander near and far.*

The bowsey in his second childhood

*Wander far and near*

Thumbs his pipe of peace and briarwood

But lacks a light to relight his manhood

*Wander near and far.*

Near and far, far and near,

The street-lamp winks, the mutes are here,

Above the steeple hangs a star

So near and far . . . far.



## THE STRAND

White Tintoretto clouds beneath my naked feet,  
This mirror of wet sand imputes a lasting mood  
To island truanities; my steps repeat

Someone's who now has left such strands for good  
Carrying his boots and paddling like a child,  
A square black figure whom the horizon understood—

My father. Who for all his responsibly compiled  
Account books of a devout, precise routine  
Kept something in him solitary and wild,

So loved the western sea and no tree's green  
Fulfilled him like these contours of Slievemore  
Menaun and Croaghaun and the bogs between.

Sixty-odd years behind him and twelve before,  
Eyeing the flange of steel in the turning belt of brine  
It was sixteen years ago he walked this shore

And the mirror caught his shape which catches mine  
But then as now the floor-mop of the foam  
Blotted the bright reflections—and no sign

Remains of face or feet when visitors have gone home.

## LAST BEFORE AMERICA

A spiral of green hay on the end of a rake:  
The moment is sweat and sun-prick—children and old women  
Big in a tiny field, midgets against the mountain,  
So toy-like yet so purposed you could take  
This for the Middle Ages.

At night the accordion melts in the wind from the sea  
From the bourne of emigrant uncle and son, a defeated  
Music that yearns and abdicates; chimney-smoke and spindrift  
Mingle and part as ghosts do. The decree  
Of the sea's divorce is final.

Pennsylvania or Boston? It was another name,  
A land of a better because an impossible promise  
Which split these families; it was to be a journey  
Away from death—yet the travellers died the same  
As those who stayed in Ireland.

Both myth and seismic history have been long suppressed  
Which made and unmade Hy Brasil—now an image  
For those who despise charts but find their dream's endorsement  
In certain long low islets snouting towards the west  
Like cubs that have lost their mother.

## WESTERN LANDSCAPE

In doggerel and stout let me honour this country  
Though the air is so soft that it smudges the words  
And herds of great clouds find the gaps in the fences  
Of chance preconceptions and foam-quoits on rock-points  
At once hit and miss, hit and miss.  
So the kiss of the past is narcotic, the ocean  
Lollingly lullingly over-insidiously  
Over and under crossing the eyes  
And docking the queues of the teetotum consciousness  
Proves and disproves what it wants.  
For the western climate is Lethe,  
The smoky taste of cooking on turf is lotus,  
There are affirmation and abnegation together  
From the broken bog with its veins of amber water,  
From the distant headland, a sphinx's fist, that barely grips the  
    sea,  
From the taut-necked donkey's neurotic-asthmatic-erotic lament-  
    ing,  
From the heron in trance and in half-mourning,  
From the mitred mountain weeping shale.

O grail of emerald passing light  
And hanging smell of sweetest hay  
And grain of sea and loom of wind  
Weavingly laughingly leavingly weepingly—  
Webs that will last and will not.

But what

Is the hold upon, the affinity with  
Ourselves of such a light and line,  
How do we find continuance  
Of our too human skeins of wish  
In this inhuman effluence?  
O relevance of cloud and rock—  
If such could be our permanence!  
The flock of mountain sheep belong

To tumbled screes, to tumbling seas  
The ribboned wrack, and moor to mist;  
But we who savour longingly  
This plenitude of solitude  
Have lost the right to residence,  
Can only glean ephemeral  
Ears of our once beatitude.  
Caressingly cajoling—  
Take what you can for soon you go—  
Consoling, coquettishly,  
The soft rain kisses and forgets,  
Silken mesh on skin and mind;  
A deaf-dumb siren that can sing  
With fingertips her falsities,  
Welcoming, abandoning.

O Brandan, spindrift hermit, who  
Hankering roaming un-homing up-anchoring  
From this rock wall looked seawards to  
Knot the horizon round your waist,  
Distil that distance and undo  
Time in a quintessential West:  
The best negation, round as nought,  
Stillier than stolen sleep—though bought  
With mortification, voiceless choir  
Where all were silent as one man  
And all desire fulfilled, unsought.

Thought:

The curragh went over the wave and dipped in the trough  
When that horny-handed saint with the abstract eye set off  
Which was fourteen hundred years ago—maybe never—  
And yet he bobs beyond that next high crest for ever.

Feeling:

Sea met sky, he had neither floor nor ceiling,  
The rising blue of turf-smoke and mountain were left behind,  
Blue neither upped nor downed, there was blue all round the  
mind.

Emotion:

One thought of God, one feeling of the ocean,  
Fused in the moving body, the unmoved soul,  
Made him a part of a not to be parted whole.  
Whole.

And the West was all the world, the lonely was the only,  
The chosen—and there was no choice—the Best,  
For the beyond was here . . .

But for us now  
The beyond is still out there as on tiptoes here we stand  
On promontories that are themselves a-tiptoe  
Reluctant to be land. Which is why this land  
Is always more than matter—as a ballet  
Dancer is more than body. The west of Ireland  
Is brute and ghost at once. Therefore in passing  
Among these shadows of this permanent show  
Flitting evolving dissolving but never quitting—  
This arbitrary and necessary Nature  
Both bountiful and callous, harsh and wheedling—  
Let now the visitor, although disfranchized  
In the constituencies of quartz and bog-oak  
And ousted from the elemental congress,  
Let me at least in token that my mother  
Earth was a rocky earth with breasts uncovered  
To suckle solitary intellects  
And limber instincts, let me, if a bastard  
Out of the West by urban civilization  
(Which unwished father claims me—so I must take  
What I can before I go) let me who am neither Brandan  
Free of all roots nor yet a rooted peasant  
Here add one stone to the indifferent cairn . . .  
With a stone on the cairn, with a word on the wind, with a  
prayer in the flesh let me honour this country.

## UNDER THE MOUNTAIN

Seen from above  
The foam in the curving bay is a goose-quill  
That feathers . . . unfeathers . . . itself.

Seen from above  
The field is a flap and the haycocks buttons  
To keep it flush with the earth.

Seen from above  
The house is a silent gadget whose purpose  
Was long since obsolete.

But when you get down  
The breakers are cold scum and the wrack  
Sizzles with stinking life.

When you get down  
The field is a failed or a worth-while crop, the source  
Of back-ache if not heartache.

And when you get down  
The house is a maelstrom of loves and hates where you—  
Having got down—belong.

## NO MORE SEA

Dove-melting mountains, ridges gashed with water,  
Itinerant clouds whose rubrics never alter,  
Give, without oath, their testimony of silence  
To islanders whose hearts themselves are islands;

For whom, if the ocean bed should silt up later  
And living thoughts coagulate in matter,  
An age of mainlanders, that dare not fancy  
Life out of uniform, will feel no envy—

No envy unless some atavistic scholar  
Plodding that dry and tight-packed world discover  
Some dusty relic that once could swim, a fossil  
Mind in its day both its own king and castle,

And thence conceive a vague inaccurate notion  
Of what it meant to live embroiled with ocean  
And between moving dunes and beyond reproving  
Sentry-boxes to have been self-moving.



## GODFATHER

Elusive

This godfather who mostly forgets one's birthday,  
Perusing  
Old schoolbooks when he should be reading the papers  
Or, when he does  
Glance at a daily, snooping between the headlines.

Revolving

Doors whisk him away as you enter a café,  
Clopping  
Hoofs of black horses drown his steps in the High Street;  
He signs  
Huge cheques without thinking, never is overdrawn.

The air-raids

Found him lying alone on his back and blowing  
Carefree  
Smoke-rings—a pipe-dream over the burning city;  
At the crack  
Of dawn he would lounge away, his hands in his pockets.

Adept

At all surprises, disguises, to conjure a Christmas  
Packet  
Into a stocking unnoticed or make without fussing  
His first call ever and leave  
Pale stone tablets like visiting cards in the churchyard.

## AUBADE FOR INFANTS

Snap the blind; I am not blind,  
I must spy what stalks behind  
Wall and window—Something large  
Is barging up beyond the down,  
Chirruping, hooting, hot of foot.

Beyond that wall what things befall?  
My eye can fly though I must crawl.  
Dance and dazzle—Something bright  
Ignites the dumps of sodden cloud,  
Loud and laughing, a fiery face . . .

Whose broad grimace (the voice is bass)  
Makes nonsense of my time and place—  
Maybe you think that I am young?  
I who flung before my birth  
To mother earth the dawn-song too!

And you—  
However old and deaf this year—  
Were near me when that song was sung.

## THE CYCLIST

Freewheeling down the escarpment past the unpassing horse  
Blazoned in chalk the wind he causes in passing  
Cools the sweat of his neck, making him one with the sky,  
In the heat of the handlebars he grasps the summer  
Being a boy and to-day a parenthesis  
Between the horizon's brackets; the main sentence  
Is to be picked up later but these five minutes  
Are all to-day and summer. The dragonfly  
Rises without take-off, horizontal,  
Underlining itself in a sliver of peacock light.

And glaring, glaring white  
The horse on the down moves within his brackets,  
The grass boils with grasshoppers, a pebble  
Scutters from under the wheel and all this country  
Is spattered white with boys riding their heat-wave,  
Feet on a narrow plank and hair thrown back  
And a surf of dust beneath them. Summer, summer—  
They chase it with butterfly nets or strike it into the deep  
In a little red ball or gulp it lathered with cream  
Or drink it through closed eyelids; until the bell  
Left-right-left gives his forgotten sentence  
And reaching the valley the boy must pedal again  
Left-right-left but meanwhile  
For ten seconds more can move as the horse in the chalk  
Moves unbeginningly calmly  
Calmly regardless of tenses and final clauses  
Calmly unendingly moves.

## WOODS

My father who found the English landscape tame  
Had hardly in his life walked in a wood,  
Too old when first he met one; Malory's knights,  
Keats's nymphs or the Midsummer Night's Dream  
Could never arras the room, where he spelled out True and Good,  
With their interleaving of half-truths and not-quotes.

While for me from the age of ten the socketed wooden gate  
Into a Dorset planting, into a dark  
But gentle ambush, was an alluring eye;  
Within was a kingdom free from time and sky,  
Caterpillar webs on the forehead, danger under the feet,  
And the mind adrift in a floating and rustling ark

Packed with birds and ghosts, two of every race,  
Trills of love from the picture-book—Oh might I never land  
But here, grown six foot tall, find me also a love  
Also out of the picture-book; whose hand  
Would be soft as the webs of the wood and on her face  
The wood-pigeon's voice would shaft a chrism from above.

So in a grassy ride a rain-filled hoof-mark coined  
By a finger of sun from the mint of Long Ago  
Was the last of Lancelot's glitter. Make-believe dies hard;  
That the rider passed here lately and is a man we know  
Is still untrue, the gate to Legend remains unbarred,  
The grown-up hates to divorce what the child joined.

Thus from a city when my father would frame  
Escape, he thought, as I do, of bog or rock  
But I have also this other, this English, choice  
Into what yet is foreign; whatever its name  
Each wood is the mystery and the recurring shock  
Of its dark coolness is a foreign voice.

Yet in using the word tame my father was maybe right,  
These woods are not the Forest; each is moored  
To a village somewhere near. If not of to-day  
They are not like the wilds of Mayo, they are assured  
Of their place by men; reprieved from the neolithic night  
By gamekeepers or by Herrick's girls at play.

And always we walk out again. The patch  
Of sky at the end of the path grows and discloses  
An ordered open air long ruled by dyke and fence,  
With geese whose form and gait proclaim their consequence.  
Pargetted outposts, windows browed with thatch,  
And cow pats—and inconsequent wild roses.

## WEEK-END

Clink—as a moth collides with a bulb of light;  
The tiny sound like an unexpected comma  
Breaks the first paragraph of their country night,  
Sending them back to the start of the leisurely sentence—  
Now where were they? Did they not frame it right?

This week-end, billed as a self-contained romance  
Entirely their own composition—but they never  
Saw any proofs—is suddenly seen askance  
And found askew; the owls beyond the window  
Know too much, the trees have changed their stance

As if they meant to grapple. Can it be true  
That even so new, so nameless, a pair of lovers  
Wishing to blend their persons in Me-and-You  
Has excited the envy, the retribution of Nature?  
This is a difficult period to construe.

‘We were joint authors and the page was white,  
We wanted the print to flow like a virgin river  
Undammed by punctuation but in despite  
Of our inner world the outer made its ingress  
When Something rang an alarm upon the light.’

## ELEGY FOR MINOR POETS

Who often found their way to pleasant meadows  
Or maybe once to a peak, who saw the Promised Land,  
Who took the correct three strides but tripped their hurdles,  
Who had some prompter they barely could understand,  
Who were too happy or sad, too soon or late,  
I would praise these in company with the Great;

For if not in the same way, they fingered the same language  
According to their lights. For them as for us  
Chance was a coryphaeus who could be either  
An angel or an *ignis fatuus*.

Let us keep our mind open, our fingers crossed;  
Some who go dancing through dark bogs are lost.

Who were lost in many ways, through comfort, lack of knowl-  
edge,

Or between women's breasts, who thought too little, too much,  
Who were the world's best talkers, in tone and rhythm  
Superb, yet as writers lacked a sense of touch,  
So either gave up or just went on and on—  
Let us salute them now their chance is gone;

And give the benefit of the doubtful summer  
To those who worshipped the sky but stayed indoors  
Bound to a desk by conscience or by the spirit's  
Hayfever. From those office and study floors  
Let the sun clamber on to the notebook, shine,  
And fill in what they groped for between each line.

Who were too carefree or careful, who were too many  
Though always few and alone, who went the pace  
But ran in circles, who were lamed by fashion,  
Who lived in the wrong time or the wrong place,  
Who might have caught fire had only a spark occurred,  
Who knew all the words but failed to achieve the Word—

Their ghosts are gagged, their books are library flotsam,  
Some of their names—not all—we learnt in school  
But, life being short, we rarely read their poems,  
Mere source-books now to point or except a rule,  
While those opinions which rank them high are based  
On a wish to be different or on lack of taste.

In spite of and because of which, we later  
Suitors to their mistress (who, unlike them, stays young)  
Do right to hang on the grave of each a trophy  
Such as, if solvent, he would himself have hung  
Above himself; these debtors preclude our scorn—  
Did we not underwrite them when we were born?



## AUTOLYCUS

In his last phase when hardly bothering  
To be a dramatist, the Master turned away  
From his taut plots and complex characters  
To tapestried romances, conjuring  
With rainbow names and handfuls of sea-spray  
And from them turned out happy Ever-afters.

Eclectic always, now extravagant,  
Sighting his matter through a timeless prism  
He ranged his classical bric-à-brac in grottos  
Where knights of Ancient Greece had Latin mottoes  
And fishermen their flapjacks—none should want  
Colour for lack of an anachronism.

A gay world certainly though pocked and scored  
With childish horrors and a fresh world though  
Its mainsprings were old gags—babies exposed,  
Identities confused and queens to be restored;  
But when the cracker bursts it proves as you supposed—  
Trinket and moral tumble out just so.

Such innocence—In his own words it was  
Like an old tale, only that where time leaps  
Between acts three and four there was something born  
Which made the stock-type virgin dance like corn  
In a wind that having known foul marshes, barren steps,  
Felt therefore kindly towards Marinas, Perditas . . .

Thus crystal learned to talk. But Shakespeare balanced it  
With what we knew already, gabbing earth  
Hot from Eastcheap—Watch your pockets when  
That rogue comes round the corner, he can slit  
Purse-strings as quickly as his maker's pen  
Will try your heartstrings in the name of mirth.

O master pedlar with your confidence tricks,  
Brooches, pomanders, broadsheets and what-have-you,  
Who hawk such entertainment but rook your client  
And leave him brooding, why should we forgive you  
Did we not know that, though more self-reliant  
Than we, you too were born and grew up in a fix?

## STREET SCENE

Between March and April when barrows of daffodils butter the  
pavement,  
The colossus of London stretches his gaunt legs, jerking  
The smoke of his hair back from his eyes and puffing  
Smoke-rings of heavenward pigeons over Saint Paul's,  
While in each little city of each individual person  
The black tree yearns for green confetti and the black kerb for  
yellow stalls.

*Ave Maria!* A sluice is suddenly opened  
Making Orchard Street a conduit for a fantastic voice;  
The Canadian sergeant turns to stone in his swagger,  
The painted girls, the lost demobbed, the pinstriped accountant  
listen  
As the swan-legged cripple straddled on flightless wings of  
crutches

Hitting her top note holds our own lame hours in equipoise,

Then waddles a yard and switches *Cruising down the river*  
Webbed feet hidden, the current smooth *On a Sunday after-*  
*noon*

Sunshine fortissimo; some young man from the Desert  
Fumbles, new from battle-dress, for his pocket,  
Drops a coin in that cap she holds like a handbag,  
Then slowly walks out of range of *A sentimental tune*

Which cruising down—repeat—cruises down a river  
That has no source nor sea but is each man's private dream  
Remote as his listening eyes; repeat for all will listen  
Cruising away from thought with *An old accordion playing*  
Not that it is, her accompanist plucks a banjo  
*On a Sunday afternoon.* She ends. And the other stream

Of Orchard Street flows back—instead of silence racket,  
Brakes gears and sparrows; the passers-by pass by,

The swan goes home on foot, a girl takes out her compact—  
Silence instead of song; the Canadian dives for the pub  
And a naval officer on the traffic island  
Unsees the buses with a mid-ocean eye.

## RELICS

Obsolete as books in leather bindings  
Buildings in stone like talkative ghosts continue  
    Their well-worn anecdotes  
As here in Oxford shadow the dark-weathered  
Astrakhan rustication of the arches  
    Puts a small world in quotes:

While high in Oxford sunlight playfully crocketed  
Pinnacles, ripe as corn on the cob, look over  
    To downs where once without either wheel or hod  
Ant-like, their muscles cracking under the sarsen,  
Shins white with chalk and eyes dark with necessity  
    The Beaker People pulled their weight of God.

## THE DRUNKARD

His last train home is Purgatory in reverse,  
A spiral back into time and down towards Hell  
Clutching a quizzical strap where wraiths of faces  
Contract, expand, revolve, impinge; disperse  
On a sickly wind which drives all wraiths pell-mell  
Through tunnels to their appointed, separate places.

And he is separate too, who had but now ascended  
Into the panarchy of created things  
Wearing his halo cocked, full of good will  
That need not be implemented; time stood still  
As the false coin rang and the four walls had wings  
And instantly the Natural Man was mended.

Instantly and it would be permanently  
God was uttered in words and gulped in gin,  
The barmaid was a Madonna, the adoration  
Of the coalman's breath was myrrh, the world was We  
And pissing under the stars an act of creation  
While the low hills lay purring round the inn.

Such was the absolute moment, to be displaced  
By moments; the clock takes over—time to descend  
Where Time will brief us, briefed himself to oppress  
The man who looks and finds Man human and not his friend  
And whose tongue feels around and around but cannot taste  
That hour-gone sacrament of drunkenness.

## HANDS AND EYES

In a high wind  
Gnarled hands cup to kindle an old briar,  
From a frilled cot  
Twin sea anemones grope for a hanging lamp,  
In a foul cage  
Old coal-gloves dangle from dejected arms.

Of which three pairs of hands the child's are helpless  
(Whose wheels barely engage)  
And the shepherd's from his age are almost bloodless  
While the chimpanzee's are hopeless  
Were there not even a cage.

In a dark room  
Docile pupils grow to their full for prey,  
Down a long bar  
Mascara scrawls a gloss on a torn leaf,  
On a high col  
The climber's blue marries the blue he climbs.

Of which three pairs of eyes the tart's are mindless  
(Who pawned her mind elsewhere)  
And the black cat's, in gear with black, are heartless  
While the alpinist's are timeless  
In gear with timeless air.

In a cold church  
It flickers in the draught, then burns erect;  
In a loud mob  
It bulges, merges, feels with a start alone;  
In a bright beam  
It waltzes dust to dust with its chance loves.

Of which three souls the praying one is selfless  
But only for a span

And the gregarious man's is rudderless, powerless,  
While the soul in love is luckless,  
Betrays what chance it can.

And still the wind  
Blows, the ape is marooned, the lamp ungrasped;  
Woman and cat  
Still wait to pounce and the climber waits to fall;  
As each soul burns  
The best it may, in foul or blustering air.  
Oh would He, were there a God, have mercy on us all?



## PLACE OF A SKULL

Earth water stars and flesh—the seamless coat  
Which is the world, he left; who from to-day  
Had no more need to wear it. The remote  
Metropolis yawned, the parchment flapped away,

Away, and the blood dried in the sand. The bored  
Soldiers played for the leavings but even they,  
Though trained to carve up continents with the sword,  
Approved the weaver who had made night and day

And time and mind a tegument, therefore swore  
To hazard it as one lot. The dice were gay  
And someone won: *Why the first time I wore  
That dead man's coat it frayed I cannot say.*

## SLOW MOVEMENT

Waking, he found himself in a train, andante,  
With wafers of early sunlight blessing the unknown fields  
And yesterday cancelled out, except for yesterday's papers  
    Huddling under the seat.

It is still very early, this is a slow movement;  
The viola-player's hand like a fish in a glass tank  
Rises, remains quivering, darts away  
    To nibble invisible weeds.

Great white nebulae lurch against the window  
To deploy across the valley, the children are not yet up  
To wave us on—we pass without spectators,  
    Braiding a voiceless creed.

And the girl opposite, name unknown, is still  
Asleep and the colour of her eyes unknown  
Which might be wells of sun or moons of wish  
    But it is still very early.

The movement ends, the train has come to a stop  
In buttercup fields, the fiddles are silent, the whole  
Shoal of silver tessellates the aquarium  
    Floor, not a bubble rises . . .

And what happens next on the programme we do not know,  
If, the red line topped on the gauge, the fish will go mad in  
    the tank  
Accelerando con forza, the sleeper open her eyes  
    And, so doing, open ours.

## CAROL

To end all carols, darling,  
To end all carols now,  
Let us walk through the cloister  
With a thoughtful brow,

Pruning what was grafted  
Through ages of blind faith—  
The rubrics and the finials  
Drift away like breath.

From Bethlehem the sheep-bells  
Grew to a steepled peal,  
The joists of the stable  
Spread an ashlar chill,

The rafters of the stable  
Hooped themselves on high  
And coveys of boys' voices  
Burst on a stone sky;

While the wrinkled, whimpering image  
Wrapped in his mother's shawl  
Was carried between pillars  
Down endless aisles and all

The doors opened before him  
In every holy place  
And the doors came to behind him,  
Left him in cold space.

Beyond our prayers and knowing,  
Many light-years away—  
So why sing carols, darling?  
To-day is to-day.

Then answered the angel:  
To-day is to-day  
And the Son of God is vanished  
But the sons of men stay

And man is a spirit  
And symbols are his meat,  
So pull not down the steeple  
In your monied street.

For money chimes feebly,  
Matter dare not sing—  
Man is a spirit,  
Let the bells ring.

Ring all your changes, darling,  
Save us from the slough;  
Begin all carols, darling,  
Begin all carols now.

## THE STYGIAN BANKS

*Like a strange soul upon the Stygian banks  
Staying for waftage.*

TROILUS AND CRESSIDA

(i)

To keep themselves young—Is that why people have children?  
To try and catch up with the ghosts of their own discoveries,  
A light that has gone into space? Unscrolling history,  
To slip back through the New Learning of adolescence  
Into those Middle Ages of nursery masons  
Where all the bricks were gay; the rondel of the years  
Never changing its burden, only the leader  
Changing his lines and time changing the leader.  
Now it is Spring, O follow your leader, follow your  
Child in his fourteenth-century dance; the wool trade  
Is booming still, wool is building churches  
And the Black Death has not come. Now it is Spring  
And the half-grown wheat in the wind is a ripple of satin,  
Let you in your child who is only lately articulate  
Throw the lasso of his sight to the height of some green thing,  
christen it  
With a new name which no one has ever used  
And call a tree a tree.

Oh, we know that the word merry  
Is vulgarized and Chaucer's England was not  
All cakes and ale nor all our childhood happy;  
Still there is something lost. The very limitedness  
Of childhood, its ignorance, its impotence,  
Made every cockcrow a miracle after the ogre's night  
And every sunbeam glad—as the medieval winter  
Slow and dense with cold made March a golden avatar,  
April Adam's innocence and May maiden's gaiety;  
Nor did the burden change though the blossoms fell,  
Alison is for ever aged fifteen  
Though leasing different bodies. So let your child

Bowl your own life in his hoop; a wandering clerk yourself  
Have you not in your time stolen a love-song  
And written it down in an abbey? A different body  
Yours from your father's and your child's from yours  
But now it is Spring and the roll of the drums of the Judgement  
Muffled with foliage, so you can fool yourself justly,  
Playing the jongleur; that your songs are an artifice  
Is of your nature; that the blossom must fall  
Is what keeps it fresh; that lives and pieces of lives  
Are cut off is needed to shape them, time is a chisel,  
So what was is. If it were not cut off,  
Youth would not be youth. This granted, take your stance  
Under the high window which will not open—  
You have a right to fool yourself; though your children  
Cannot keep either you or themselves young  
They *are* themselves in passing and the aubade  
Though—no, because—the window will not open  
Will find itself in the air, cut off as it must be  
By the sudden cry of alarm from the turreted watchman  
Which also rhymes. Cut off like a piece of sculpture.  
This is the dawn. Reality. Fantasy holds.

(ii)

Fantasy holds the child in the man, the lover in the monk, the  
monk in the lover,  
The arbour in the abbey, the ages together,  
But as notes are together in music—no merging of history;  
The aisles of this church have their intervals. Father and son  
Do not repeat; this child has different totems  
From that one and from his father's. The slab in the floor of  
the nave  
Makes one family a sonnet, each name with a line to itself,  
But the lines, however the bones may be jumbled beneath,  
Merge no more than the lives did. We must avoid  
That haunting wish to fuse all persons together;  
To *be* my neighbour is banned—and if I could be,

I could neither know him nor love him. Each of us carries  
His own ground with him to walk on. Look at your child  
Bowling his hoop along that arterial road  
Where he cannot read the signpost; as he trundles,  
It may, as they say, ring some bell from your past  
Or, as Aristotle would put it, by an analogy  
Match his private theme with themes of your own  
As a waft of roses for one, of beans for another,  
Will waft him back not to a general love  
But to some girl with a name, herself and no other.  
Analogy, correspondence, metaphor, harmonics—  
We have no word for the bridges between our present  
Selves and our past selves or between ourselves and others  
Or between one part of ourselves and another part,  
Yet we must take it as spoken, the bridge is there  
Or how could your child's hoop cross it? Strike the right note  
And the wine-glasses will ring. I am alone  
And you are alone and he and she are alone  
But in that we carry our grounds we can superimpose them,  
No more fusing them than a pack of cards is fused  
Yet the Jack comes next to the Queen. Though when they are  
dealt

You will often fail of the sequence; only you know  
That there were such cards in the pack, there *are* other people  
And moss-roses and beanfields and in yourself  
Monk and lover and a battered hoop  
With you for once behind it—and a coffin  
With you for once within it. All these active,  
Even that idol of wax which now it is Spring  
Jogs your elbow as the blossom falls  
Whispering: 'Fulfil yourself. But renounce the temptation  
To imbrue the world with self and thus blaspheme  
All other selves by merging them. Rather fill,  
Fulfil yourself with the Give and Take of the Spring  
And honour the green of the grass, the rights of the others,  
Taking what they can give, giving what they can take,  
Not random pigments muddled and puddled together



But a marriage of light reflected.' Thus the figure  
 Who has retired, warning against retiring  
 Now it is Spring and the roll of the drums of the Judgement  
 Can still be assumed far off. The hoops are running  
 A cow-parsley gauntlet, white as though for a wedding,  
 Alison is fifteen, the labourer's arm  
 Ripples with muscle, the green corn with wind,  
 And the glasses chime to a note that we cannot hear  
 For the frequency is too high. Within us a monk  
 Copies a love-song but remains a monk  
 And out there beyond our eyes Tom-Dick-and-Harry  
 Remain respectively Tom and Dick and Harry  
 Clapping backs in the sunshine. Granted the word merry  
 Is out of favour, it is the word's fault;  
 The thing itself yet sprouts and spouts before you  
 Calling for a communion. Fill your glasses;  
 When they are emptied again, the note may be higher yet  
 And your own glass may break.

(iii)

And what when the glass breaks when the Note sounds?  
 What when the wind blows and the bough breaks?  
 Will each life seem a lullaby cut off  
 And no humanity adult? From the tree-top  
 Where all our conversation was *Why* and *Mine*  
 The answer now being *Why Not? Not Yours!*  
 If so, if we have by a sense no right to be here,  
 Trespassers, propertyless, never of age,  
 Branded by thoughts, born with a silver spoon—  
 With the power of words—in the mouth and smuggling in  
 To a world of foregone conclusions the heresy of choice,  
 If, to sum all, to be born man is wrong,  
 Breaking a closed circle, then let us break it clean  
 And make two wrongs a right, using the contraband  
 The genes got past the customs, putting it out at interest  
 And in the face of Nature's ritual of reflex actions



Riding our heresy high. Look, love! Now it is Spring  
And the wind blows, pick what buds you fancy,  
Fill your wine-glass, rockabye baby, break the circular world  
wide open;

It is your birthright never to be grown up  
But always growing, never yourself completed  
As are the brutes and therefore, unlike the brutes,  
Able to shape something outside yourself  
Finding completion only in othernesses  
Whether perceived started without you  
Or conceived within you, ending beyond you;  
For things that you do or make can win a final pattern  
But never yourself—never at least until  
The velocity of a wind, the frequency of a note,  
End in a topple, a clink, a shutter released  
And the dead man gets his exposure. But now it is Spring  
And we need not be camera-conscious, we are still doing and  
making

Not to display our muscles but to elicit  
A rhythm, a value, implicit in something beyond us.  
Rockabye baby! The wind that whitens the cornfield  
And lilts in the telephone wires is tilting the tree-top  
Further and further—but sing in your cradle,  
You can outplay that wind which cutting off your song  
Can never cut off itself, merely repeats itself  
Where yours will end and find itself in the air  
Unlike your body not returning to earth  
But There—like a piece of sculpture.

Yes, let the teacher of ethics  
Reduce all acts to selfishness, let the economist  
Confuse conditions and causes and the psychologist  
Prove and disprove the rose from manure and the scientist  
Explain all value away by material fact—  
What do I care? It is Spring and it always will be  
However the blossoms fall; and however impure  
Our human motives, we can sheer off sometimes  
On the purity of a tangent. Let the wind

Lunge like a trombone, draw back his hand to his mouth,  
Then lunge again and further; he is welcome  
And time and all particulars are welcome  
And death which rounds the song. Fill your glasses;  
There is a distinction between vintages  
And heretics must have courage. There is a despair  
Which the animals do not know, it is chiefly exhaustion  
When the bull kneels down in the ring; but our despair  
Need not exhaust, it is our privilege—  
Our paradox—to recognize the insoluble  
And going up with an outstretched hand salute it.  
For we, unlike the bull, have a matador within us  
More titivated still, more cruel still,  
Whom we have known for years and the holiday crowd  
Have been waiting there for years and the sand is smooth  
And the sun will not go in till the show is over. Yes,  
We too are in a ring and gaudy banderillas  
May quiver in our flanks; the paradox  
Is that we can break out—being about to die  
We can salute our death, the consciousness  
Of what must be ennobling that arena  
Where we have defied what must be.

Now it is Spring  
And the blossoms fall like sighs but we can hold them  
Each as a note in the air, a chain of defiance,  
Making the transient last by having Seen it  
And so distilled value from mere existence;  
Thus when our own existence is cut off  
That stroke will put a seal upon our value.  
The eye will close but the vision that it borrowed  
Has sealed the roses red.

(iv)

That roses are red is home—and homesickness.  
As that men are alive is living—and deathwish;  
And that men are dead is a name and a cause.  
The hoop takes different turnings, Alison different bodies,

The burden does not change;  
Though the spokesman may simulate progress  
It must be within that unchanging framework,  
Drilling the peas and beans in the garden but not seeing over  
the wall,

The mellow grass-grown wall encircling and forbidding  
Too high to climb and no birds fly across it;  
Only an incoming wind which unlike the winds of the garden  
(The winds which threaten the new-born child in the tree-top  
But only can share the name of This by analogy)  
Flutters no paper tag on a stick in a plot,  
Moves no leaf; the dandelion puffballs  
Ignore it and we often. Often—but why are that lover's  
Eyes of a sudden distant? He does not raise them—  
One cannot see over the wall—Not one hair on his head  
Is blown out of place but he ceases to give, give out;  
Does not even widen his focus for here is  
A movement only inwards, intake of distance.  
Until she speaks and the wall is back in its place  
Rounding off their vision again with words,  
Unchanging burden to which the bees assent  
And the thrush with a snail in its beak. A 'real' wind  
Yawns—and flicks a tree-top nonchalantly  
As if to say 'Look, though half in my sleep,  
I can do more than that Other.' So all is well. As it was.  
The voices of pigeons are grinding their delicate mills of lust,  
Arkwright and Hargreaves are busy changing England,  
The hooter sounds at eight, Darwin will sweep away  
One code and give us a new one; all is well  
As the girl sees in her lover's eyes returning—  
'I am so glad you are here. I am so glad you are back.  
Now you must stay for ever. Do not be foolish;  
Even if a wind from over the wall can reach you,  
It is a one-way traffic.' And saying this she smiles  
And smiling this she lies and lying knows it,  
There is a fleck of distance in her eyes too,  
But the mill must grind. Why is it people have children?

So take London to-day: the queues of itching minds  
 Waiting for news that they do not want, for nostrums  
 They only pretend to believe in; most of their living  
 Is grinding mills that are not even their own.  
 The pigeons are luckier in their significant ritual,  
 And the dome of Saint Paul's more overt in its significance  
 But what to these does the word significant signify,  
 Who are neither autonomous crystals nor willing notes  
 In any symphonic whole? What they achieve of value  
 Is mainly in spasms, might be ascribed to chance  
 Did we not know that all men, even apparent ciphers,  
 Rough out their own best moments. Moments too rare  
 For most of these in the queue. Granted the garden,  
 There are distinctions in soil and in what comes out of it  
 (To consider means is not mean, so long as a gadget  
 Is not set up for an end, so long as an end  
 Can infiltrate into means); but still, above all,  
 To raise a value gardens must be gardened  
 Which is where choice comes in. Then will. Then sweat.  
 And—in the last resort—there is something else comes in  
 That does not belong and yet—You see that wall?  
 Many will tell you that is what protects us,  
 What makes in fact the garden, saves it from not-being  
 So that, now it is there, we need not think beyond it;  
 But look at the eyes of that tired man in the queue  
 In whom fatigue dulling the senses has rendered  
 Some other part of him sensitive—Intake of distance.  
 What is it that comes in? Can it be that the wall  
 Is really a stepping-stone? So that what is beyond it  
 (That which as well perhaps could be called what is Not)  
 Is the sanction itself of the wall and so of the garden?  
 Do we owe these colours and shapes to something which seems  
 their death?  
 It does not bear thinking of; that was not a thought came in  
 To the tired man's eyes—Look back at him now; he has lost it,  
 Perhaps we only imagined that *he* imagined—  
 No matter, the queue is moving. Move along there;

If you want a system the public address is a good one  
And you need not ask how came this mechanical voice  
Nor by what right it tells you to move along there.  
The blue cock pigeon is courting again. The hooter  
Will sound at eight. That is the end of the news.

(v)

That is the end of the news. The humanist  
Thinks he has heard something new and the man in the street  
Passing the garish but dowdy hoarding dodges the dripping brush  
While his brother changes the posters. Now it is Spring  
But the know-all blonde on the poster will never know it  
For only a few projections of human minds  
Are able to give and take. For all that, now it is Spring—  
Foaming white edges of roads, white hedges, white  
Alison walking the rim of a classical text  
Lovingly copied by monks who misunderstood it  
But in her arms are flowers, long hours of flowers,  
And her smile serene as young and the horned head-dress  
Cuts the enamel sky. People have children,  
One might say, to be childish. Munching salad  
Your child can taste the colour itself—the green—  
And the colour of radish—the red; his jaded parents,  
Wise to the fallacy, foster it (for we begin with  
A felt unity and, they presume, shall end with  
An unfelt ditto but all between is by proxy,  
So the more mouthfuls of cress he takes the better,  
For *we* can remember . . . can we? . . .) Glory is what?  
The remembrance of an effulgence that was illusion?  
Or is the illusion now in burnishing the past?  
Or building up, in the catch-phrase, for the future  
Which, with a capital F, is a catch-phrase too? Nostalgia  
Implies having a home. Which heroes die for—  
But can they without having seen it? The hackneyed songs  
Mislead us—Home Sweet Rose, Last Home of Summer—  
The paradox of a sentimentalist



Insisting on clinging to what he insists is gone;  
When now is the opposite paradox now it is Spring  
And what we insist remains we insist on leaving  
After exchange of courtesies. Let the blossom  
Fall, that is fact but the fact can be retranslated  
To value of blossom and also to value of fall;  
While we, who recognize both, must turn our backs on the  
orchard

To follow the road of facts which we make ourselves  
Where others, men, will help us to conjure value  
In passing and out of passing but always turning  
Our backs on the road we have made  
Until—which has value too—at a certain point we fall  
And the hoop topples into the ditch. The well-worn symbols  
Of quests and inns and pilgrims' progresses  
Do correspond; the inn-sign clanks in the night  
And the windows gild the cobbles—which is merry,  
All the more because we meet it in transit  
And the next morning Tom and Dick as to-day  
May clap each other on the back and Harry may still stare down  
Into the tawny well in the pewter mug—  
Or so we think having left them but in fact  
They too are for the road, they too have heard  
The roll of recruiting drums beyond the horizon  
However the woods of spring may blur the reverberations  
As in the little church the fresco above the rood-loft  
Has lost its percussive colours but though faded  
The bearded Judge and the horned figures with prongs  
Unlike the blonde in the poster still can give. And take.

(vi)

And take me then! In the dawn under the high window  
The burden is the same. And on the black embankment  
The lost man watching the lights jig in the water  
And choosing the spot to plunge has the same burden  
But the lines between are gone; his own invention

They slipped his memory sooner. So the lover,  
 Once the watchman cries, must kiss his hand  
 Up to the grille and go. And the lisping child  
 Envious of a bird stretches his arms to fly  
 Or to embrace the sea, loving it at first sight:  
 O air, O water, take me! Thus there are some  
 Who when the wind which is not like any wind known  
 Brings to their ears from ahead the drums of the Judgement  
 Slacken their pace and, not to be taken by That,  
 Implore all others to take them. As if those others could answer  
 In the absolute terms required. It is only silence  
 Could answer them as they want, only the wind  
 Which they dread, the wind which passes Alison by  
 Without even ruffling her dress, yet once in a way  
 Passes not by but into her. Ancient Athens  
 Was a sparrow-chatter of agora-gibes and eristic  
 But in the mind of Socrates beneath  
 His quizzical voice was the daemon, a cone of silence;  
 And in Imperial Rome in the roaring bloody arena  
 Linking the man with the net and the man with the sword  
 Was a circuit of silence, electric. The Middle Ages  
 Were rowdy with earth and hell, yet in Alison's poise in the  
     orchard,  
 Dripping from the pen of the monk, the lance of the Lanz-  
     knecht,  
 Was a silence, drop by drop. But here to-day in London  
 Can we—we cannot have—lost it? Talking so much  
 Our optimism and pessimism are both  
 Corrupted dialects, divorced from grammar,  
 Almost indeed from meaning. The hooter sounds,  
 The busker sings to the queue, grinding of gears,  
 But if we stopped haggling, stopped as we did in the raids,  
 The gap in our personal racket, as in the gunfire,  
 Should become positive, crystal; which is the end of the news  
 Which is the beginning of wisdom. No captions and no jargon,  
 No diminution, distortion or sterilization of entity,  
 But calling a tree a tree. For this wisdom

Is not an abstraction, a wordiness, but being silence  
Is love of the chanting world.

(vii)

So let the world chant on. There is harsh fruit in the garden  
But flowers are flowers and, what is more, can be tended  
And here we stay and communicate, joining hands  
To share the burden while each in turn can throw  
His own lines in between; friar and wandering tumbler  
Smuggle a pollen of culture into the villages  
And Socrates stands by the sun-dial, talking away  
But his soul is calm, moving, not seeming to move,  
Like the pointer of shadow and silent. Yes, here we stay—for  
a little—

Strange souls in the daylight. Troilus  
Patrols the Stygian banks, eager to cross,  
But the value is not on the further side of the river,  
The value lies in his eagerness. No communion  
In sex or elsewhere can be reached and kept  
Perfectly or for ever. The closed window,  
The river of Styx, the wall of limitation  
Beyond which the word beyond loses its meaning,  
Are the fertilizing paradox, the grille  
That, severing, joins, the end to make us begin  
Again and again, the infinite dark that sanctions  
Our growing flowers in the light, our having children;  
The silence behind our music. The very silence  
Which the true martyr hears on the pyre to darken  
The hissing motley flames and the jeers, to make him  
In spite of logic a phoenix. From that silence  
Are borrowed ear and voice and from that darkness  
We borrow vision, seal the roses red.  
The hooter will sound at eight till the wall falls  
But in the meantime—which is time—it is ours  
To practise a faith which is heresy and by defying  
Our nature to raise a flag on it. Come, let us laugh



As the animals cannot, laugh in the mind for joy;  
Let the west wind lather the tree-top, toss the cradle,  
Let the young decant the spring for us, banners of wine  
While the Jack sits next to the Queen, let us busily gaily  
Build us a paean, mixing for need is the metaphors,  
Munching the green and the red, becoming as little children  
Whose curls are falling blossom, using the eye  
And the ear to fill the orchestra, plant the garden,  
Bowling a hoop, braiding a love-song, fighting  
A fire that cannot be seen; heretics all  
Who unlike anything else that breathes in the world  
When feeling pain can be lyrical and despairing  
Can choose what we despair of. Glory is what?  
We cannot answer in words though every verb is a hint of it  
And even Die is a live word. Nor can we answer  
In any particular action for each is adulterate coin  
However much we may buy with it. No answer  
Is ours—yet we are unique  
In putting the question at all and a false coin  
Presumes a true mint somewhere. Your child's hoop,  
Though far from a perfect circle, holds the road  
And the road is far from straight, yet like a bee  
Can pollinate the towns for the towns though ugly  
Have blossom in them somewhere. Far from perfect  
Presumes perfection *where?* A catechism the drums  
Asseverate day-long, night-long: Glory is what?  
A question! . . . Now it is Spring.

## LETTER FROM INDIA

*for Hedli*

Our letters cross by nosing silver  
Place of a skull, skull of a star,  
Each answer coming late and little,  
The air-mail being no avatar,  
And whence I think I know you are  
I feel divided as for ever.

For here where men as fungi burgeon  
And each crushed puffball dies in dust  
This plethoric yet phantom setting  
Makes yours remote so that even lust  
Can take no tint nor curve on trust  
Beyond these plains' beyondless margin.

You are north-west but what is Western  
Assurance here where words are snakes  
Gulping their tails, flies that endemic  
In mosque and temple, morgue and jakes,  
Eat their blind fill of man's mistakes  
And yet each carcase proves eternal?

Here where the banyan weeps her children,  
Where pavements flower with wounds and fins  
And kite and vulture hold their vigil  
Which never ends, never begins  
To end, this world which spins and grins  
Seems a mere sabbath of bacilli;

So that, for all the beauties hoarded  
In Buddhist stupa, Mogul tomb,  
In flick of hand and fold of sari,  
In chant and scripture which illumine  
The soul's long night, I find no room  
For our short night in this miasma

Where smiling, sidling, cuddling hookahs  
They breed and broil, breed and brawl,  
Their name being legend while their lifewish  
Verging on deathwish founders all  
This colour in one pool, one pall,  
Granting no incense and no lotus.

Whereas though Europe founder likewise  
Too close acquaintance leaves us blind  
Who by aloofness, by selection,  
Have written off what looms behind  
The fragile fences of our mind,  
Have written off the flood, the jungle.

So cast up here this India jolts us  
Awake to what engrossed our sleep;  
This was the truth and now we see it,  
This was the horror—it is deep;  
The lid is off, the things that creep  
Down there are we, we were there always.

And always also, doubtless, ruthless  
Doubt made us grope for the same clue,  
We too sat cross-legged, eyes on navel,  
Deaf to the senses and we too  
Saw the Beyond—but now the view  
Is of the near, the too near only.

I have seen Sheikhpura High School  
Fester with glaze-eyed refugees  
And the bad coin of fear inverted  
Under Purana Kila's trees  
And like doomed oxen those and these  
Cooped by their past in a blind circle;

And day by day, night upon nightmare,  
Have spied old faults and sores laid bare,

Line upon lineless, measureless under  
Pretended measure, and no air  
To feed such premises as where  
A private plot would warrant shelter.

For even should humanism always  
Have been half-impotent, debased,  
How for all that can her own children  
Break from the retina encased  
In which our vision here must waste,  
Meeting but waste, the chance of Vision?

And a Testator half-forgotten  
Still with his will sways you and me  
Presuming Jack and Jill so sacred  
That though all rivers reach the sea  
His course through land's diversity  
Is still for us what makes a river.

What wonder then if from this maelstrom  
Of persons where no person counts  
I should feel frail trusting the ether  
With love in weighed and staid amounts  
And as the liaising aircraft mounts  
Can think its chartered speed illusion?

For though to me an absolute person  
Yet even you and even by me  
Being clamped by distance in a burga  
Cannot be seen, still less can see  
How in this earlier century  
Dark children daub the skies with arson.

And the small noises that invest me,  
The sweepers' early morning slow  
Swishing, the electric fans, the crickets,  
Plait a dense hedge between us so

That your voice rings of long ago,  
Beauty asleep in a Grimm story.

Yet standing here and notwithstanding  
Our severance, need I think it loss  
If from this past you are my future  
As in all spite of gulf and gloss  
However much their letters cross  
East and West are wed and welcome;

And both of us are both, in either  
An India sleeps below our West,  
So you for me are proud and finite  
As Europe is, yet on your breast  
I could find too that undistressed  
East which is east and west and neither?

*October 1947*











## 2

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